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ABSTRACT

Twenty-nine federally funded demonstration projects are said to provide screening and diagnostic teaching services to learning disabled children (2-21 years old) and inservice training to teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. Five programs are briefly summarized. (CL)

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LEARNING DISABILITIES

Suppose you have a TV set with a perfect antenna and picture tube but with wiring in-between that distorts the reception. Such a TV set gives a rough idea of the basic plight of more than 2 million children in the United States. These children have normal or above average intelligence but cannot keep up with other children because a system malfunction prevents sights, sounds, and other sensory stimuli from being correctly perceived and interpreted by the brain.

They are identified as learning disabled, an umbrella term that covers "minimal brain dysfunction," "dyslexia," "central processing dysfunction," "developmental lag," and other labels applied to specific learning disabilities.

Learning disabled children may hear but not comprehend multiple directions. They may have undue difficulty recalling specific shapes or words. They may have poor eye-hand coordination affecting their ability to transfer ideas into writing. Or they may have impaired language development. These difficulties may be unrecognizable in the preschool years, but become apparent when they interfere, often to a marked degree, with listening, writing, thinking, spelling, and arithmetic skills.

The symptoms and forms of learning disabilities are so diverse--or so similar to other disabilities--that many children have been incorrectly placed in classes for the slow learner, the emotionally disturbed, or the hearing impaired. Or the learning disabled children may seem so normal that the problem is not recognized and they are pushed along in the regular classroom year after year. Either way, the deficiencies remain uncorrected, and the children fall further and further behind.

Failure and frustration set in. A child may withdraw, set up a block against learning, or become troublesome. With emotional problems masking the initial difficulties, learning disabled children become even harder to identify. But in nearly every case, the difficulties can be alleviated or corrected if diagnosed in time.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE / Education Division

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HELP ON THE WAY

In 1970 Congress added part G to the Education of the Handicapped Act (Title VI, Public Law 91-230) authorizing the Office of Education's Bureau of Education for the Handicapped to establish programs and services to meet the educational needs of children with specific learning disabilities.

In accordance with the law, programs were to be developed by State or local education agencies, institutions of higher education, or a variety of public and private nonprofit agencies and organizations. These groups would apply for 2-year grants to set up learning disability demonstration centers.

To finance these programs, a budget of $1 million was appropriated. And in each succeeding year the appropriation has risen--to $4.25 million in fiscal year 1976. In school year 1975-76, the Office of Education supports one technical assistance project and 29 Learning Disability Child Service Demonstration Centers in 27 States and Puerto Rico. To date the program has funded centers in 48 States.

It is anticipated that eventually model projects will be funded in all 50 States and become springboards for statewide programs. Toward this end, projects are expected to coordinate their plans with the learning disability specialist in their State education agency. While 44 States recognize learning disabilities in their legislation, only a few have set up specific procedures to remedy the problem. For this reason the law directs the centers to share their effective methods with other educational institutions, organizations, and agencies, thereby reaching a larger learning disabled population with pupil identification and services.

HOW IT WORKS

Just what do the centers do? Once a child with learning disabilities has been identified by testing or by a teacher, he undergoes further screening at the center to pinpoint the problem. Does he interchange certain letters of the alphabet? Have a hard time discriminating shapes and sounds? Have an unusually short attention span? Whatever the problem, comprehensive testing is essential to focus on each individual's specific educational drawbacks.

When the child's disabilities are thoroughly diagnosed, he begins a program to improve his skills. Programs vary among centers. In some the learning disabled children work together with a specialist. In others the children are provided individual attention within the regular classroom. In still others, the children are part of the regular classroom but receive help in a special room for a few hours each day.

In addition to bringing direct services to approximately 7,700 children, the model centers also train teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and counselors to carry out the corrective measures. It is estimated that 1 to 3 percent of school-age children are learning disabled, but research now indicates that some target populations have a much higher incidence. In-service teacher training thus becomes a vital function of the centers if the large number of handicapped students are to be served adequately.

EXAMPLES

Current projects are helping children aged 2 to 21, from rural, urban, and suburban areas, and from many ethnic backgrounds. To serve this diverse population, the demonstration centers are trying a variety of innovative approaches to improve individual skills.

Some examples:

In Shelburne, Vermont, all preschool children are observed in a series of activities geared to the child's age level. If the consulting teacher, specialists in reading, speech, and language development, and the early education expert from the State education agency agree that the child is unable to perform at that level or is potentially learning disabled, a trained paraprofessional is sent into the home 5 hours a week to help parents improve the child's learning skills.

If the child, for instance, is having problems with large-muscle coordination, the paraprofessional prescribes a series of activities such as bouncing, throwing, and catching a large ball. If the preschooler has trouble discriminating between different shapes and colors, parents are taught to play sorting games with the child. One game begins with identifying a large red triangle and a blue square. Gradually the game progresses to smaller pieces, three-dimensions, and a variety of shapes and colors as a way of preparing the child for letter discrimination and later reading skills.

Vermont's elementary school demonstration center measures progress of all its students every 18 days. Whenever a student falls behind, consulting teachers and specialists give supplemental help on the spot.

Making Every Child Capable of Achieving (MECCA) in Trumbull County, Connecticut, tested kindergartners in the program and found that 100 percent were scoring in the "high risk" range for reading readiness. Nine months later only 22 percent were in this grouping while 45 percent scored in the successful range.

One reason for this improvement in reading readiness skills is that the MECCA teachers in Trumbull and the two replication sites, West Hartford and Meriden, found it much easier for children to learn by tackling an activity one step at a time. So the teachers decided what children needed to achieve in a given exercise and divided it into simple steps. One kindergarten project, for instance, included making robot costumes out of paper bags. The steps included grasping the scissors, cutting with them, picking up a crayon and using it for drawing, tracing, following dot-to-dot--all difficult skills for the learning disabled children to attain. The steps in this activity are based on the widely held belief that everyone must develop certain skills such as reaching, grasping, and manipulating before attaining the more refined levels of these skills (printing and writing, for example) that are required in the classroom. If some of these beginning skills are not acquired, learning problems develop. Careful, individual attention is given to the children so that these early skills are achieved through activities designed for step-by-step learning.

The Salisbury, North Carolina, center operates in a school containing informal open classrooms. One or two children with learning difficulties are incorporated into each heterogeneous "family" of eight or nine pupils.

Several rules of thumb are applied in this organized but "open" school:

- Students will be self-motivated if they are free to express themselves, move about the classroom, and--most importantly--initiate their own projects based on their own interests.

- There are at least 10 different ways to learn anything.

- Everyone develops at different rates; teachers should be sensitive to the time when a child is ready to move on.

- Children can learn from each other by interacting in their schoolwork, recreation, and daily conversations.

In Bloomington, Indiana, the Center for Innovation and Teaching the Handicapped is serving learning disabled children in 70 schools throughout the southern and southcentral portions of the State. Depending on the number of children needing special help and the resources available in these sparsely populated areas, some children work in a specially equipped room. Others remain in the regular classroom, and still others work in a classroom exclusively for children with learning disabilities. One way to improve the memory of learning disabled children is to help them use all the senses while they learn the alphabet. A child may look at the letter A on the blackboard, say it aloud, trace it with his finger on sandpaper, print it and cut it out, and then compare his letter to the original.

Another technique is to tailor games to specific learning deficiencies. In one board game, the child with speech problems makes the sound of the card he chooses while the child who has difficulty discriminating between letters matches his card with the same letter on the board. The student doing well in all areas keeps score and tells the other whether or not they answered correctly.

In Merrimac, Massachusetts, the NETWORK, a nonprofit educational services organization, gives technical assistance to the 29 centers. This group assesses the needs of the projects and helps them. The NETWORK's staff aids in the organizational problems of budgeting, evaluation, and staff management while regional resource experts in learning disabilities are on call to help in curriculum development and program content. The NETWORK also sends the centers a monthly newsletter, sponsors regional conferences, and maintains a computer terminal to link them with widespread information sources.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

As court decisions continue to uphold the right of all children to an appropriate education, more States are moving toward implementing mandatory legislation for handicapped children. That means expanded services are needed within the public schools. One way to reach more learning disabled children and help them achieve their potential is to increase the number of trained professionals.

Some 7,800 teachers received inservice training last year through the 29 model centers funded by the Office of Education's Bureau of Education for the Handicapped. Another 1,534 teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators received stipends specifically for training at colleges and universities. Of these, 690 were working at the bachelor's, 661 at the master's, and 183 at the doctorate level.

However, a comprehensive understanding of the learning disability phenomenon also depends on research. Only recently have educators, researchers, and doctors alike agreed on the magnitude of the problem. Because of this problem, the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped supports six research grants in learning disabilities. An Austin, Texas, project develops materials for and works with learning disabled bilingual children. In New York City a project is trying out some beginning reading techniques and materials for the child who confuses letters and scrambles words.

The 29 current projects will be evaluated with some basic research questions in mind. What methods work best for different children? Can a child receive sufficient help within the regular classroom? Should the curriculum be based primarily on the strengths or weaknesses of the individual? As answers are found to some of these questions, the Bureau of Education for

the Handicapped will be better able to help practitioners in the field and share with them curriculum materials and approaches which have proven effective.

Cooperation among the disciplines is an essential key to overcoming the complex problems of learning disabilities. The Bureau of Education for the Handicapped is calling upon the talented people in all disciplines involved with children and with learning, as well as teachers of varied specialties, to pool their expertise and work together to meet the needs of the learning disabled.

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For further information:

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